TRANSFORM YOUR HABITS

Learn How Psychology Makes It Easier for You to Live Healthy and Actually Stick to Your Goals

JAMES CLEAR

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TRANSFORM YOUR HABITS

2nd Edition

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10 THINGS THIS GUIDE WILL TEACH YOU

1. How to reverse your bad habits and stick to good ones.
2. The science of how your brain processes habits.
3. The common mistakes most people make (and how to avoid them).
4. How to overcome a lack of motivation and willpower.
5. How to develop a stronger identity and believe in yourself.
6. How to make time for new habits (even when your life gets crazy).
7. How to design your environment to make success easier.
8. How to make big changes in your life without overwhelming yourself.
9. How to get back on track when you get off course with your goals.
10. And most importantly, how to put these ideas into practice in real life.

Table of Contents

Why Is It So Hard to Stick to Good Habits? 5

The Common Mistake You Want to Avoid 6

The Science of How Your Habits Work 9

Identity-Based Habits: How to Actually Stick to Your Goals 17

The Best Way to Start Your New Habit 24

How to Fit New Habits Into Your Life 27

How to Make Big Changes Without Overwhelming Yourself 31

How to Get Back on Track After Slipping Up 34

How to Break a Bad Habit (and Replace it With a Good One) 39

The Next Step: Where to Go From Here 45

Why Is It So Hard to Stick to Good Habits?

It seems to be remarkably easy to fall into unhealthy routines.

- Eating junk food.
- Watching TV instead of going to the gym.
- Showing up to a job you hate everyday.
- Biting your nails.
- Smoking.

There's no shortage of unhealthy and unproductive behaviors. And we all struggle with them from time to time.

But why? You want to live a healthy, fulfilling, and remarkable life. And every now and then you probably get really motivated and inspired to make a change. So how come it is more likely that this time next year you'll be doing the same thing rather than something better? Why is it so hard to stick to good habits?

I believe that it is because we usually try to make changes in the wrong way. And in this guide, I'm going to share a blend of science and real-world experiences that share a better strategy for making long-term changes in your life.

Let's get started.

The Common Mistake You Want to Avoid

> *Your audacious life goals are fabulous. We're proud of you for having them. But it's possible that those goals are designed to distract you from the thing that's really frightening you—the shift in daily habits that would mean a re–invention of how you see yourself.*
>
> *—Seth Godin*

Transformations and overnight successes get a lot of hype. (For good reason, who wouldn't want to be more successful in less time?)

But here's the problem: when you hear about a dramatic transformation (like someone losing 100 pounds) or a incredible success story (like someone building a million dollar business in 1 year), the only thing you know is the event that people are talking about. You don't hear anything about the process that came before it or about the habits that led to the eventual result.

It's easy to let these incredible stories trick you into doing too much, too soon. I know I've done it. When you get motivated and inspired to take your life to the next level, it's so easy to get obsessed with the result. *I need to lose 20 pounds (or 40 or 60 or 100). I need to squat 300 pounds (or 400 or 500). I need to meditate 3 days per week (or 5 or 7).*

Or thousands of other variations of your life goals.

It's natural to think that we need the result, the transformation, the overnight success. But that's not what you need. You need better habits.

It’s so easy to overestimate the importance of one defining moment and underestimate the value of making better decisions on a daily basis.

Almost every habit that you have — good or bad — is the result of many small decisions over time. And if this is true, if the problems you’re facing now are the result of thousands of small decisions made over the course of years, then wouldn’t it make sense that path to success, health, strength, joy, fulfillment, meaning, and vitality would also be through thousands of daily decisions?

And yet, how easily we forget this when we want to make a change.

When you become obsessed with achieving a result quickly, the only thing you think about is how to get to your goal, and you forget to realize that our process for achieving goals is just as important as whether or not you achieve them at all. The desire to achieve results quickly fools you into thinking that the result is prize.

But here's the truth...

Becoming the type of person you want to become — someone who lives by a stronger standard, someone who believes in themselves, someone who can be counted on by the people that matter to them — is about the daily process you follow and not the ultimate product you achieve.

Why is this true? Because your life today is essentially the sum of your habits.

How in shape or out of shape you are? A result of your habits.

How happy or unhappy you are? A result of your habits.

How successful or unsuccessful you are? A result of your habits.

What you repeatedly do (i.e. what you spend time thinking about and doing each day) ultimately forms the person you are, the things you believe, and the personality that you portray.

The most common mistake that people make is setting their sights on an event, a transformation, an overnight success they want to achieve – rather than focusing on their habits and routines.

I've been guilty of this just like everyone else. And even today, I'm still learning how to master my habits just like you.

But over time, I've discovered a helpful blend of academic research and real-world experiences that have allowed me to make progress in many areas of life. In this guide, I want to share that progress with you so that you can avoid chasing another overnight success and actually stick to your goals for the long-term.

Let's get started by talking about the science of sticking to good habits.

The Science of How Your Habits Work (The 3 R's of Habit Change)

There is a simple 3–step pattern that every habit follows. I call this pattern the "3 R's of Habit Change" and it goes like this...

1. Reminder (the trigger that initiates the behavior)
2. Routine (the behavior itself; the action you take)
3. Reward (the benefit you gain from doing the behavior)

This sequence has been proven over and over again by behavioral psychology researchers. I originally learned of this cycle from Stanford professor, BJ Fogg. And more recently, I read about it in Charles Duhigg's best–selling book, *The Power of Habit*.

(Duhigg's book refers to the three steps as cue, routine, reward. Regardless of how it's phrased, the point is that there is a lot of science behind the process of habit formation, and so we can be relatively confident that your habits follow the same cycle.)

Let me show you what the 3 R's look like in real life by applying the framework to a typical habit. (In this case, answering a phone call.)

Step One: Your phone rings (reminder). This is the reminder that initiates the behavior. The ring acts as a trigger or cue to tell you to answer the phone. It is the prompt that starts the behavior.

Step Two: You answer your phone (routine). This is the actual behavior. When your phone rings, you have a habit of answering it.

Step Three: You find out who is calling (reward). The reward is the benefit gained from doing the behavior. In this case, the reward for completing the habit was satisfying your curiosity to find out why the other person was calling you.

Result: If the reward is positive, then the cycle forms a positive feedback loop that tells your brain, "Next time this reminder happens, do the same thing." (i.e. When the phone rings again, answer it.)

Follow this same cycle enough times and you'll stop thinking about it. Your behavior will just become a habit.

THE 3 R's OF HABIT FORMATION
1 REMINDER
The cue or trigger that starts the habit.
(Example: Traffic light turns green.)
ROUTINE 2
The action you take. The habit itself.
(Example: You drive through the intersection.)
REWARD
3
The benefit you gain from doing the habit.
(Example: You get closer to your destination.)
If the reward is positive, then you'll have a desire to repeat the action the next time a reminder pops up. Eventually, this repeitition will form a new habit.

All habits form by the same 3–step process. (Graphic based on Charles Duhigg's "Habit Loop" in The Power of Habit. Created by James Clear.)

How can you use this structure to create new habits and actually stick to them?

Here's how...

Step 1: Use a Current Habit as the Reminder for Your New One

If you talk to your friends about starting a new habit, they might tell you that you need to exercise self–control or that you need to find a new dose of willpower.

I disagree.

Getting motivated and trying to remember to do a new behavior is the exact wrong way to go about it. If you think about this, it makes sense. Sometimes you feel motivated and sometimes you don't, right? So why would you want to rely on motivation (something that changes) to create a new habit (something that you want to be consistent)?

This is why the reminder – the trigger for your new behavior – is such a critical part of forming new habits. A good reminder makes it easier for you to start your habit by encoding your new behavior in something that you already do, rather than relying on getting motivated.

For example, I created a new habit of flossing each day by always doing it after brushing my teeth. The act of brushing my teeth was something that I already did and it acted as the trigger or cue to do my new behavior.

To make things even easier and prevent myself from having to remember to floss, I bought a bowl, placed it next to my toothbrush, and put a handful of pre–made flossers in it. Now I see the floss every time I reach for my toothbrush.

Setting up a visible reminder and linking my new habit with a current behavior made it much easier to change. No need to be motivated. No need to remember.

How to Choose Your Reminder

It doesn't matter if it's working out or eating healthy or creating art, you can't expect yourself to magically stick to a new habit without setting up a system that makes it easier to start. And for that reason, picking the correct reminder for your new habit is the first step to making change easier.

The reminder that you choose to initiate your new behavior is specific to your life and the habit that you're trying to create.

The best way I know to discover a good reminder for your new habit is to write down two lists. In the first list, write down the things that you do each day without fail.

For example…

- Get in the shower.
- Put your shoes on.
- Brush your teeth.
- Flush the toilet.
- Sit down for dinner.
- Turn the lights off.
- Get into bed.

You'll often find that many of these items are daily health habits like washing your face, drinking morning tea, brushing your teeth, and so on. Those actions can act as reminders for new health habits. For example, *"After I drink my*

morning tea, I meditate for 60 seconds."

In the second list, write down the things that happen to you each day...

- You stop at a red light.
- You get a text message.
- A commercial comes on TV.
- A song ends.
- The sun sets.

These events can also act as triggers for your new habit. For example, if you wanted to "*When a commercial comes on TV, I do five pushups."*

With these two lists, you'll have a wide range of things that you already do and already respond to each day. Those are the perfect reminders for new habits.

For example, let's say you want to feel happier. Expressing gratitude is one proven way to boost happiness. Using the list above, you could pick the reminder "sit down for dinner" and use it as a cue to say one thing that you're grateful for today.

"When I sit down for dinner, I say one thing that I'm grateful for today."

That's the type of small behavior that could blossom into a more grateful outlook on life in general.

Step 2: Make Your Habits Incredibly Easy to Start

> *Make it so easy you can't say no.*
> *—Leo Babauta*

As I mentioned in the beginning of this guide, it's incredibly easy to get caught up in the desire to make massive changes in your life. We watch incredible weight loss transformations and think that we need to lose 30 pounds in the next 4 weeks. We see elite athletes on TV and wish that we could run faster and jump higher tomorrow. We want to earn more, do more, and be more … right now.

I've felt those things too, so I get it. And in general, I applaud the enthusiasm. I'm glad that you want great things for your life and I want to do what I can to help you achieve them. But it's important to remember that lasting change is a product of daily habits, not once-in-a-lifetime transformations.

If you want to start a new habit and begin living healthier and happier, then I have one suggestion that I cannot emphasis enough: **start small.** In the words of Leo Babauta, "make it so easy that you can't say no."

How small? Stanford professor BJ Fogg suggests that people who want to start flossing begin by flossing only one tooth. Just one.

In the beginning, performance doesn't matter. What does matter is becoming the type of person who always sticks to your new habit – no matter how small or insignificant it seems. You can build up to the level of performance that you want once the behavior becomes consistent.

Your homework: Pick a new habit you want to start. Now ask yourself, "How can I make this new behavior so easy to do that I can't say no?"

Step 3: Always Reward Yourself

It's important to celebrate. (I think that's just as true in life as it is with habits.)

When it comes to sticking to better habits, there is an important reason to always reward yourself: we want to continue doing things that make us feel good.

And that is why it's especially important that you reward yourself each time you practice your new habit.

For example, if I'm working towards a new fitness goal, then I'll often tell myself at the end of a workout, "That was good day." Or, "Good job. You made progress today."

If you feel like it, you could even tell yourself "Victory!" or "Success!" each time you do your new habit.

I haven't done this myself, but some people swear by it.

- Floss one tooth. *"Victory!"*
- Eat a healthy meal. *"Success!"*
- Do five pushups. *"Good work!"*

Rewarding yourself with positive self–talk can take some getting used to if you're not someone who typically does that. But even if it sounds silly, research has proven that the reward is an important part of the habit process. Give yourself some credit and enjoy each small success.

Related note: Make sure that the habits you are trying to build are actually important to you. It's tough to find a reward in something when you're only doing it because you think other people expect it or would approve of it. It's your life, so make sure you're spending your time on things that are important to you.

Now that we've covered the science of habit formation, let's talk about how to use it in real life.

Identity-Based Habits: How to Actually Stick to Your Goals For the Long-Term

We've covered the science of habit formation. But in the real world, there is often a difference between theory and practice.

Whenever I write, I do my best to not merely share ideas backed by science, but also to highlight real-world lessons that make it easier for you to put those ideas into practice.

This is especially important when it comes to building better habits. We all want to become better people — stronger and healthier, more creative and more skilled, a better friend or family member. But even if we get really inspired and start doing things better, it's tough to actually stick to new behaviors. It's more likely that this time next year you'll be doing the same thing than performing a new habit with ease.

Luckily, you can use a strategy that I call "identity-based habits" to make change easier and stick to your goals over the long-term.

Here's how it works...

What Remembering Names Can Teach You About Habits

My girlfriend is great at remembering people's names.

Recently, she told me a story that happened when she was in high school. She went to a large high school and it was the first day of class. Many of the students had never met before that day. The teacher went around the room and asked each person to introduce themselves. At the end, the teacher asked if anyone could remember everyone's name.

My girlfriend raised her hand and proceeded to go around the room and accurately name all 30 or so people. The rest of the room was stunned. The guy next to her looked over and said, "I couldn't even remember your name."

She said that moment was an affirming experience for her. After that happened she felt like, "I'm the type of person who is good at remembering people's names."

Even today, she is great at remembering the names of anyone we come across.

Here's what I learned from that story: In order to believe in a new identity, we have to prove it to ourselves.

Identity-Based Habits: How to Build Lasting Habits

The key to building lasting habits is focusing on creating a new identity first. Your current behaviors are simply a reflection of your current identity. What you do now is a mirror image of the type of person you believe that you are (either consciously or subconsciously).

To change your behavior for good, you need to start believing new things about yourself.

Imagine how we typically set goals. We might start by saying *"I want to lose weight"* or *"I want to get stronger."* If you're lucky, someone might say, "That's

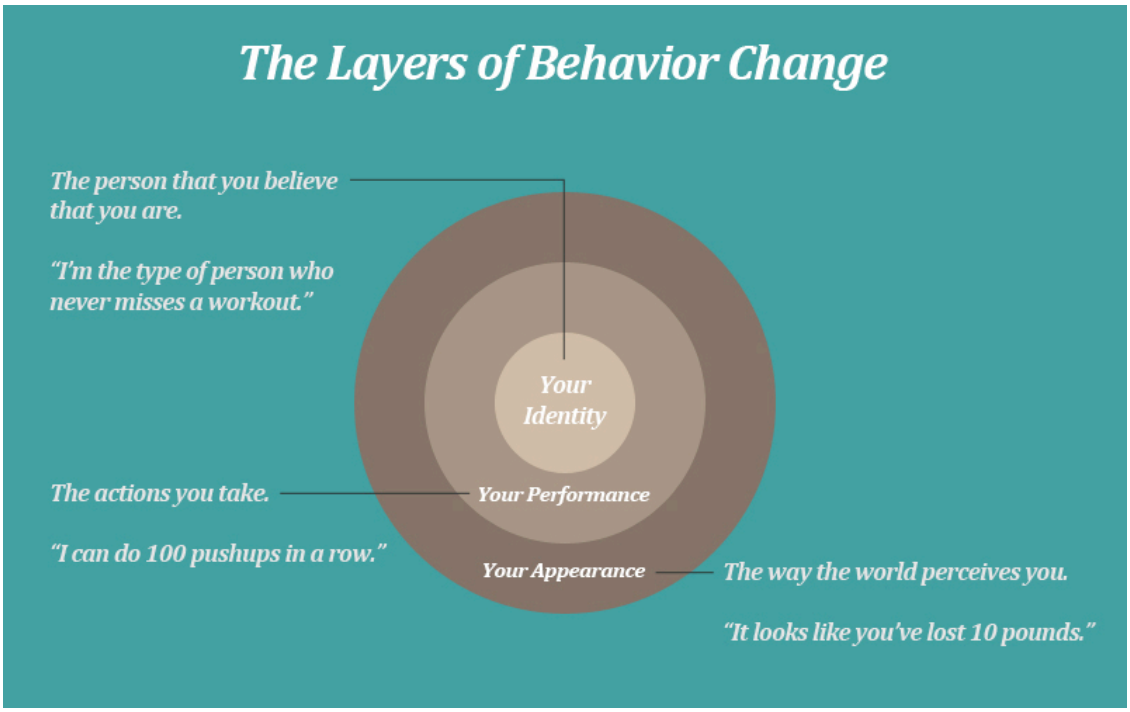
great, but you should be more specific."

So then you say, *"I want to lose 20 pounds"* or *"I want to squat 300 pounds."*

These goals are centered around our performance or our appearance.

Performance and appearance goals are great, but they aren't the same as habits. If you're already doing a behavior, then these types of goals can help drive you forward. **But if you're trying to start a new behavior, then I think it would be far better to start with an identity–based goal.**

The image below shows the difference between identity–based goals and performance and appearance–based goals.


The Layers of Behavior Change
The person that you believe that you are.
"I'm the type of person who never misses a workout."
Your Identity
The actions you take.
Your Performance
"I can do 100 pushups in a row."
Your Appearance
The way the world perceives you.
"It looks like you've lost 10 pounds."

Graphic by James Clear.

The interior of behavior change and building better habits is your identity. Each action you perform is driven by the fundamental belief that it is possible. So if you change your identity (the type of person that you believe that you are), then it's easier to change your actions.

The reason why it's so hard to stick to new habits is that we often try to achieve a performance or appearance–based goal without changing our identity. Most of the time we try to achieve results before proving to ourselves that we have the identity of the type of person we want to become.

It should be the other way around.

The Recipe for Sustained Success

Changing your beliefs isn't nearly as hard as you might think. There are two steps.

1. Decide the type of person you want to be.
2. Prove it to yourself with small wins.

Note: I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to start with incredibly small steps. The goal is not to achieve results at first, the goal is to become the type of person who can achieve those things.

For example, a person who works out consistently is the type of person who can become strong. Develop the identity of someone who works out first, and then move on to performance and appearance later. Start small and trust that the results will come as you develop a new identity.

On the next page, you'll find five examples of how you can use identity-based habits in real life.

Example 1: Want to lose weight?

Identity: Become the type of person who moves more every day.

Small win: Buy a pedometer. Walk 50 steps when you get home from work. Tomorrow, walk 100 steps. The day after that, 150 steps. If you do this 5 days per week and add 50 steps each day, then by the end of the year, you'll be walking over 10,000 steps per day.

Example 2: Want to become a better writer?

Identity: Become the type of person who writes 1,000 words every day.

Small win: Write one paragraph each day this week.

Example 3: Want to become strong?

Identity: Become the type of person who never misses a workout.

Small win: Do pushups every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Example 4: Want to be a better friend?

Identity: Become the type of person who always stays in touch.

Small win: Call one friend every Saturday. If you repeat the same people every 3 months, you'll stay close with 12 old friends throughout the year.

Example 5: Want to be taken seriously at work?

Identity: become the type of person who is always on time.

Small win: Schedule meetings with an additional 15–minute gap between them so that you can go from meeting to meeting and always show up early.

What is your identity?

In my experience, when you want to become better at something, proving your identity to yourself is far more important than getting amazing results. This is especially true at first.

If you want to get motivated and inspired, then feel free to watch a YouTube video, listen to your favorite song, or try P90X. But don't be surprised if you burn out after a week. You can't rely on being motivated to make lasting changes in your life. You have to become the type of person you want to be, and that starts with proving your new identity to yourself.

If you're looking to make a change, then I say stop worrying about results and start worrying about your identity. Become the type of person who can achieve the things you want to achieve. Build the habit now. The results can come later.

Combining Strategies for Maximum Success

Identity-based habits offer a framework through which to view your goals. The 3 R's of habit change provide a plan for achieving your new identity. Combining both of these ideas can make change easier for you overall.

In other words, identity-based habits keep you focused on the right things: like starting small, building your identity, and not worrying about results. Meanwhile, the 3 R's of habit change make sure that you do things in the right way: like linking your new habit to a current behavior and rewarding yourself for a job well done.

The Best Way to Start Your New Habit

If you're serious about doing things better than you are now – in other words, if you're serious about sticking to good habits – then you have to start small.

Imagine the typical habits, good or bad: Brushing your teeth. Putting your seatbelt on. Biting your nails.

These actions are small enough that you don't even think about them. You simply do them automatically. They are tiny actions that become consistent patterns.

Wouldn't it make sense that if we wanted to form new habits, the best way to start would be to make tiny changes that our brain could quickly learn and automatically repeat?

What if you started thinking of your life goals, not as big, audacious things that you can only achieve when the time is right or when you have better resources or when you finally catch your big break … but instead as tiny, daily behaviors that are repeated until success becomes inevitable?

What if losing 50 pounds wasn't dependent on a researcher discovering the perfect diet or you finding a superhuman dose of willpower, but hinged on a series of tiny habits that you could always control? Habits like walking for 20 minutes per day, drinking 8 glasses of water per day, eating two meals instead of three.

Too often we get obsessed with making life–changing transformations. I believe you would make more progress by focusing on lifestyle behaviors.

- Losing 50 pounds would be life–changing, drinking 8 glasses of water per day is a new type of lifestyle.
- Publishing your first book would be life–changing, emailing a new book agent each day is a new type of lifestyle.
- Running a marathon would be life–changing, running 3 days per week is a new type of lifestyle.
- Earning an extra $20,000 each year would be life–changing, working an extra 5 hours per week as a freelancer is a new type of lifestyle.
- Squatting 100 more pounds would be life–changing, squatting 3 days per week is a new type of lifestyle.

Do you see the difference?

I think the following quote from BJ Fogg, a professor at Stanford University, sums this idea up nicely.

> *If you plant the right seed in the right spot, it will grow without further coaxing. I believe this is the best metaphor for creating habits.*
>
> *The "right seed" is the tiny behavior that you choose. The "right spot" is the sequencing — what it comes after. The "coaxing" part is amping up motivation, which I think has nothing to do with creating habits. In fact, focusing on motivation as the key to habits is exactly wrong.*
>
> *Let me be more explicit: If you pick the right small behavior and sequence it right, then you won't have to motivate yourself to have it grow. It will just happen naturally, like a good seed planted in a good spot.*
>
> *—BJ Fogg*

How great is that?

The typical approach is to dive into the deep end as soon as you get a dose of motivation, only to fail quickly and wish you had more willpower as your new habit drowns. The new approach is to wade into the shallow water, slowly going deeper until you reach the point where you can swim whether you're motivated or not.

Daily habits — tiny routines that are repeatable — are what make big dreams a reality. Dream big, but start small.

How to Fit New Habits Into Your Life

Knowing how to make changes is one thing, but fitting new goals into your life is something else entirely.

Making changes is tough. Whenever your schedule get crazy, the inertia of life can pull you away from your goals and right back into your old habits.

How can you overcome this tendency to fall off course and make time for new goals in your schedule?

Using the strategies already mentioned in this guide – like the 3 R's of habit change and identity-based habits – will help keep you on track.

But those strategies aren't the only tools at your disposal. In this section, I'll share another way to stick to good habits that doesn't require incredible doses of willpower or remarkable motivation. I'll also share two examples of how I've used this strategy successfully in my own life.

The Problem With How We Usually Set Goals

If you're anything like the typical human, then you have dreams and goals in your life. In fact, there are probably many things — large and small — that you would like to accomplish.

That's great, but there is one common mistake we often make when it comes to

setting goals. (I know I've committed this error many times myself.)

The problem is this: we set a deadline, but not a schedule.

We focus on the end goal that we want to achieve and the deadline we want to do it by. We say things like, "I want to lose 20 pounds by the summer" or "I want to add 50 pounds to my bench press in the next 12 weeks."

The problem with this strategy is that if we don't achieve the arbitrary timeline that we set in the beginning, then we feel like a failure … even if we are better off than we were at the start. The end result, sadly, is that we often give up if we don't reach our goal by the initial deadline.

Here's the good news: there's a better way and it's simple.

The Power of Setting a Schedule, Not a Deadline

In my experience, a better way to approach your goals and build good habits is to set a schedule to operate by rather than a deadline to perform by.

Instead of giving yourself a deadline to accomplish a particular goal by (and then feeling like a failure if you don't achieve it), you should choose a goal that is important to you and then set a schedule to work towards it consistently.

That might not sound like a big shift, but it is.

The Idea in Practice

Most of the time, I try to be a practitioner of my ideas and not just someone who shares their opinion, so allow me to explain this strategy by using two real examples from my own life.

Example 1: Writing

I publish a new article every Monday and Thursday. Since my first article on November 12, 2012, I've been delivering two articles per week, every week. Sometimes the article is shorter than expected, sometimes it's not as compelling as I had hoped, and sometimes it's not as useful as it could be … but it gets out to the world nonetheless.

Of course, I didn't always operate on a Monday-Thursday schedule. In fact, I came up with reasons for actively avoiding a schedule. I told myself, *"I do my best writing when I'm inspired, so I'll just wait until I get the urge to write."*

I assumed that if I wasn't doing my best work, then I shouldn't be doing it at all. The problem with that strategy is that my output was erratic at best.

It took me awhile to realize it, but it's not about always doing your best work, it's about doing the best you can on a consistent basis.

Once I stopped focusing on results and simply held myself to a consistent schedule, my work and my output improved. In the first 6 months after I started writing two times per week, I wrote more in quantity and better in quality than in the previous two years.

It doesn't matter what you're doing, if you only work when you feel motivated, then you'll never be consistent enough to make significant impact on your life.

Example 2: Exercise

In August 2012, I decided that I wanted to do 100 pushups in a row with strict form. When I tried it the first time, I only got 36.

In the past, I might have set a deadline for myself: “Do 100 pushups by December 31st.”

This time, I decided to set a schedule for my workouts. I started doing pushup workouts every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. There was no total pushup goal for any single workout. The goal is simply to do the workout. (Just like there is no single goal for any one article I write. The goal is simply to write the article.)

I'm still on my way to 100 consecutive pushups (my current best is 80 in a row), but in the 9 months that have followed since I began, I have kept my Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule and completed over 100 pushup workouts.

Focus on the Practice, Not the Performance

Do you see how the two examples above are different than most goals we set for ourselves?

In both cases (writing and exercise), I made consistent progress towards my goals not by setting a deadline for my performance, but by sticking to a schedule. The focus is on doing the action, not on achieving X goal by a certain date.

If you want to be the type of person who accomplishes things on a consistent basis, then give yourself a schedule to follow, not a deadline to race towards.

How to Make Big Changes Without Overwhelming Yourself

I'm a big proponent of doing one thing at a time. There is a mountain of scientific research showing that multi-tasking and dividing your attention is less productive than staying focused on a single goal.

But what if you want to change multiple things in your life? What if you want to get better at more than one thing … and you want to do it right now?

Well, I've got good news. Thanks to “keystone habits” you can actually focus on a single thing and improve your life in multiple areas at the same time.

Let's talk about what keystone habits are and how you can use them in your life.

The Power of Keystone Habits

A keystone habit is a behavior or routine that naturally pulls the rest of your life in order.

I first heard about this idea in Charles Duhigg’s book, *The Power of Habit*. When I started looking at my own life, I began to notice a few routines that led to better behaviors elsewhere.

For example, a funny thing happens when I lift weights…

When I work out, I want to eat better. Even though I could reward myself with chocolate bars and ice cream, I feel like eating healthy, unprocessed foods.

When I start working after exercising, I seem to be more productive. My mind is clearer and my writing is crisper. Thoughts flow easily.

And at the end of the day, I fall asleep quickly. I tend to sleep more and feel fresh when I wake up.

And when I don't exercise, I see the opposite effect. I'm more prone to eating junk food. I stay up later, get distracted more easily, and I waste time on unimportant tasks. Stress builds and I start to feel tension in my back.

In other words, fitness is the keystone habit that puts the rest of my life in place. I don’t have to think about eating better. I don’t have to force myself to focus on getting things done.

I’m not always on top of my game, but on the days I train everything seems to come a little bit easier. Exercise naturally pushes me towards my best self.

What Are Your Keystone Habits?

Improving your lifestyle and becoming the type of person who “has their act together” isn’t nearly as hard as you might think. In fact, you might need just one keystone habit before the dominoes start falling everywhere.

If you have multiple things that you would like to improve, imagine how much easier it would be for you to do if you discovered one or two keystone habits that naturally put you on the path to success.

The good news? You probably already know what these behaviors are for you.

What is the one thing that – when you do it – your day seems to go more smoothly?

For me, it is working out. Meanwhile, other people swear by a morning run. And you'll find dozens of CEOs who claim their daily meditation habit is the key to their success.

No matter what your keystone habit is, it is worth your time to focus on it and do more of it. The right habit, when done consistently, can impact your life in many ways.

How to Get Back on Track After Slipping Up

Habit formation hinges on your ability to bounce back. There will always be instances when following your regular routine is basically impossible.

But small hiccups don't make you a failure, they make you human. The most successful people in the world slip up on their habits too. What separates them isn't their ability to avoid mistakes, it's their ability to get back on track quickly.

The important thing to realize is that the best strategy isn't to avoid failure, it's to plan for it. Using the 4 strategies below, you can "plan for chaos" and develop a strategy for getting back on track *before* you get off course.

1. Put your habits on your calendar.

Claiming that you want to accomplish vague goals (i.e. *"I want to eat healthier"*) doesn't give your mind a clear schedule to operate by.

Your habits need a time and place to live in your life.

Want to get back on track with your writing schedule? 9am on Monday morning. Butt in chair. Hands on keyboard. That's when this is happening.

Want to exercise? Give yourself a time and place that it needs to happen. 6pm every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I'll see you in the gym.

The bottom line is this: it might be nice to tell yourself that you're going to change, but getting specific makes it real and gives you a reason and a reminder to get back on track whenever you slip up.

Soon is not a time and some is not a number. When and where, exactly, are you going to do this? Do you have a system in place to automatically remind you to do your new habit?

Note: Another way to "automatically remind yourself" is by tying your new habit to a current behavior. For more on this, go back and read Chapter 2.

2. Stick to your schedule, even in small ways.

It's not the individual impact of slipping up that is a big deal. It's the cumulative impact of never getting back on track. (i.e. If you miss one workout, you won't suddenly be out of shape, but missing 3 weeks will make a difference.)

For that reason, it's critical to stick to your schedule, even if it's only in a very small way.

- Don't have enough time to do a full workout? Just squat.
- Don't have enough time to write an article? Write a paragraph.
- Don't have enough time to do yoga? Take ten seconds to breathe.
- Don't have enough time to go on vacation? Give yourself a mini–break and drive to the neighboring town.

Find a way to stick to the schedule, no matter how small it is. Here's another example...

Let's say you woke up today with the intention of running 3 miles this

afternoon. During the day, your schedule got crazy and time started to get away from you. When you look up at the clock, you only have 20 minutes to workout.

At this point, you have two options.

The first option is to say, *"Twenty minutes isn't enough time to change my clothes, put on my running shoes, and workout."* At this point, you'll probably convince yourself that your time is better spent getting caught up on emails or making a phone call you've been putting off … or a thousand other alternatives.

This is what I would usually have done in the past – get pressed for time and come up with a good reason for not working out at all.

The second option is to reduce the scope, but stick to the schedule. You could tell yourself, *"Twenty minutes isn't enough time to get changed and run 3 miles, but it is enough time to put on my shoes and run 5 sprints."*

On a daily basis, the impact of doing five sprints isn't that significant, especially when you had planned to run 3 miles. But the cumulative impact of always staying on schedule is huge.

Furthermore, this strategy allows you to prove to yourself that you can get something done even when the situation isn't ideal. It's the cumulative impact of always sticking to your schedule that will carry you to long–term success. That's how little goals become lifetime habits.

3. Have someone who expects something of you.

I've been on many teams throughout my athletic career. You know what happens when you have friends, teammates, and coaches expecting you to be at practice? You show up.

The good news is that you don't have to be on a team to make this work. Talk to strangers and make friends in the gym. Simply knowing that a familiar face expects to see you can be enough to get you to show up.

Important: If you don't feel like you have anyone who expects you to achieve your goals, then contact me. I'll give you my number and text you whenever you need a reminder. I want you to achieve your goals and I'm here to help however I can.

4. Design your environment for success.

If you think that you need more motivation or more willpower to stick to your goals, then I have good news. You don't.

Most of us acknowledge that the people who surround us influence our behaviors, but the connection between the items that surround us and our behaviors is less obvious.

The truth is that the signs you read, the things that are on your desk at work, the pictures hanging on your wall at home are all pieces of your environment that can trigger you to take different actions – regardless of how motivated you feel.

When I wanted to start flossing consistently, one of the most useful changes I made was taking the floss out of the drawer and keeping it next to my toothbrush on the counter. It sounds like a silly thing to focus on, but the visual cue of seeing the floss every time I brushed my teeth meant that I didn't have to remember to pull it out of the drawer.

With this simple environment change, I made it easy to do the new habit and I didn't need more willpower or motivation to do it.

Develop a Plan for Bouncing Back

Change can be hard. In the beginning, your healthy habits might take two steps forward and one step back. Anticipating those backward steps and developing a plan for getting back on track quickly can make all the difference in the world.

How to Break a Bad Habit (and Replace it With a Good One)

We've covered a lot of information on how build good habits, but what about breaking bad ones?

Bad habits interrupt your life and prevent you from accomplishing your goals. They jeopardize your health — both mentally and physically. And they waste your time and energy.

So why do we still do them? And most importantly, is there anything you can do about it? How can you delete your bad behaviors and stick to good ones instead?

I certainly don't have all of the answers, but keep reading and I'll share what I've learned about how to break a bad habit.

What causes bad habits?

Most of your bad habits are caused by two things…

Stress and boredom.

Most of the time, bad habits are simply a way of dealing with stress and boredom. Everything from biting your nails to overspending on a shopping spree to drinking every weekend to wasting time on the internet can be a simple

response to stress and boredom.

But it doesn't have to be that way. You can teach yourself new and healthy ways to deal with stress and boredom, which you can then substitute in place of your bad habits.

Of course, sometimes the stress or boredom that is on the surface is actually caused by deeper issues. These issues can be tough to think about, but if you're serious about making changes then you have to be honest with yourself. Are there certain beliefs or reasons that are behind the bad habit? Is there something deeper — a fear, an event, or a limiting belief — that is causing you to hold on to something that is bad for you?

Recognizing the causes of your bad habits is crucial to overcoming them.

You don't eliminate a bad habit, you replace it.

All of the habits that you have right now — good or bad — are in your life for a reason. In some way, these behaviors provide a benefit to you, even if they are bad for you in other ways.

Sometimes the benefit is biological like it is with smoking or drugs. Sometimes it's emotional like it is when you stay in a relationship that is bad for you. And in many cases, your bad habit is a simple way to cope with stress. For example, biting your nails, pulling your hair, tapping your foot, or clenching your jaw.

These "benefits" or reasons extend to smaller bad habits as well.

For example, opening your email inbox as soon as you turn on your computer might make you feel connected. At the same time looking at all of those emails destroys your productivity, divides your attention, and overwhelms you with

stress. But, it prevents you from feeling like you're "missing out" … and so you do it again.

Because bad habits provide some type of benefit in your life, it's very difficult to simply eliminate them. (This is why simplistic advice like "just stop doing it" rarely works.) Instead, you need to replace a bad habit with a new habit that provides a similar benefit.

For example, if you smoke when you get stressed, then it's a bad plan to "just stop smoking" when that happens. Instead, you should come up with a different way to deal with stress and insert that new behavior instead of having a cigarette.

In other words, bad habits address certain needs in your life. And for that reason, it's better to replace your bad habits with a healthier behavior that addresses that same need. If you expect yourself to simply cut out bad habits without replacing them, then you'll have certain needs that will be unmet and it's going to be hard to stick to a routine of "just don't do it" for very long.

How to break a bad habit

Here are some additional ideas for breaking your bad habits and thinking about the process in a new way.

Choose a substitute for your bad habit. You need to have a plan ahead of time for how you will respond when you face the stress or boredom that prompts your bad habit. What are you going to do when you get the urge to smoke? (Example: breathing exercises instead.) What are you going to do when Facebook is calling to you to procrastinate? (Example: write one sentence for work.) Whatever it is and whatever you're dealing with, you need to have a plan for what you will do instead of your bad habit.

Cut out as many triggers as possible. If you smoke when you drink, then don't go to the bar. If you eat cookies when they are in the house, then throw them all away. If the first thing you do when you sit on the couch is pick up the TV remote, then hide the remote in a closet in a different room. Make it easier on yourself to break bad habits by avoiding the things that cause them.

Right now, your environment makes your bad habit easier and good habits harder. Change your environment and you can change the outcome.

Join forces with somebody. How often do you try to diet in private? Or maybe you "quit smoking" … but you kept it to yourself? (That way no one will see you fail, right?)

Instead, pair up with someone and quit together. The two of you can hold each other accountable and celebrate your victories together. Knowing that someone else expects you to be better is a powerful motivator.

Visualize yourself succeeding. See yourself throwing away the cigarettes or buying healthy food or waking up early. Whatever the bad habit is that you are looking to break, visualize yourself crushing it, smiling, and enjoying your success. See yourself building a new identity.

You don't need to be someone else, you just need to return to the old you. So often we think that to break our bad habits, we need to become an entirely new person. The truth is that you already have it in you to be someone without your bad habits. In fact, it's very unlikely that you had these bad habits all of your life. You don't need to quit smoking, you just need to return to being a non–smoker. You don't need to transform into a healthy person, you just need to return to being healthy. Even if it was years ago, you have already lived without this bad habit, which means you can most definitely do it again.

Use the word "but" to overcome negative self–talk. One thing about battling bad habits is that it's easy to judge yourself for not acting better. Every time you slip up or make a mistake, it's easy to tell yourself how much you suck.

Whenever that happens, finish the sentence with "but"…

- *"I'm fat and out of shape, but I could be in shape a few months from now."*
- *"I'm stupid and nobody respects me, but I'm working to develop a valuable skill."*
- *"I'm a failure, but everybody fails sometimes."*

Plan for failure. We all slip up every now and then. As my main man Steve Kamb says, "When you screw up, skip a workout, eat bad foods, or sleep in, it doesn't make you a bad person. It makes you human. Welcome to the club."

So rather than beating yourself up over a mistake, plan for it. We all get off track, what separates top performers from everyone else is that they get back on track very quickly.

Taking the First Step to Breaking Bad Habits

It's easy to get caught up in how you feel about your bad habits. You can make yourself feel guilty or spend your time dreaming about how you wish things were … but these thoughts take you away from what's actually happening.

Instead, it's awareness that will show you how to actually make change. When does your bad habit actually happen? How many times do you do it each day? Where are you? Who are you with? What triggers the behavior and causes it to

start?

Simply tracking these issues will make you more aware of the behavior and give you dozens of ideas for stopping it.

Here's a simple way to start: just track how many times per day your bad habit happens. Put a piece of paper in your pocket and a pen. Each time your bad habit happens, mark it down on your paper. At the end of the day, count up all of the tally marks and calculate your total.

In the beginning your goal isn't to judge yourself or feel guilty about doing something unhealthy or unproductive. The only goal is to be aware of when it happens and how often it happens. Wrap your head around the problem by being aware of it. Then, you can start to implement the ideas in this article and break your bad habit.

Breaking bad habits takes time and effort, but mostly it takes perseverance. Most people who end up breaking their bad habits try and fail multiple times before they make it work. You might not have success right away, but that doesn't mean you can't have it at all.

The Next Step: Where to Go From Here

We've covered a lot of ground in this guide.

We talked about the science of habit formation and the 3-step process that governs all habits. We talked about how to setup your new habits for success by using reminders and rewards.

We talked about focusing on your identity first and leaving the performance and appearance based goals for later.

We talked about the power of setting a schedule and not holding yourself to a deadline. This is particularly useful when your life gets crazy because you can reduce the scope and stay on task.

We talked about how to use keystone habits to make change throughout your entire life without getting overwhelmed.

And we covered 4 strategies for bouncing back after getting off track – because we all slip up every now and then.

With these ideas, you should be well equipped to make change in your life and stick to healthier habits for the long-term, which brings me to my final two points.

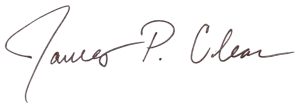
1. Knowledge is useless without action. You know what to do, now it's time to do it. If you have a goal that is important to you, then use these ideas

to make it a reality.

2. Our community is here to support you. Each week, I write articles for a small community of people who are committed to getting better, living healthier, and making the world a better place. For my part, I do my best to help them achieve their goals. And I'd like to do the same for you.

If you have questions, you can always contact me at http://jamesclear.com

I don't have it all figured out, but I'm doing my best to walk the slow march toward greatness with you. If there's anything I can do, please know that I'm here to help however I can.

Never settle,

James Clear